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ABSTRACT

Language Arts is an area which covers many subjects, each important, each one interdependent upon the other. Prospective teachers, first and foremost, should have the various language theories reviewed in their methods courses. Practical classroom activities--such as keeping spelling lists, practicing creative writing, and sharing literature--allow students to work together or individually. Such activities give students self-discipline, self-motivation, and provide them with a variety of communication skills. (MG)

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Theory + Practice = Effective Language Arts Teaching

Janet T. Bercik

Teaching the methods courses in Reading and Language Arts caused me to ask myself, "What is the best way to teach prospective teachers about these areas?" How does one translate practice into theory? My answer was to have students experience what children experience, and do what children in the elementary school do. As a result of this, my students get a work-out. Their activities involve hands on experiences in the school, activities during the lecture, and activities relative to the specific subject areas as assignments. My lectures cover theory to lay the foundation; my practical knowledge adds to their supports; and their active participation begins to build the structure.

Teaching children or teaching prospective teachers about the Language Arts causes concern about the best approach to use and which area to cover. Language Arts is an area covering many subjects, each important, each one interdependent upon the other. If one is teaching children, is reading stressed over writing? If teaching prospective teachers, is writing stressed over reading? or Should all areas be interrelated?

As a teacher with 25 years experience (20 in the elementary school and 5 in higher education), I tried to mesh these areas together. I found, through experience, that reading and writing go hand in hand. All other areas blend in if the teacher knows how to incorporate them. This incorporation does not come about through osmosis, it comes from experience, knowledge of the subject areas, knowledge of children, and research in teaching.

In the classroom, my reading words became additions to the spelling list as optional word choices. The spelling list was then incorporated into the daily board work that involved phonics, basic grammar, or anything else we might be doing. A daily sharing of literature was provided somewhere in the course of the day, even if only for 10 minutes. Creative writing was encouraged in the learning centers, in activities relative to specific reading assignments, from board work that had been prepared earlier, and in science/social studies reports.

The class always knew what we were doing for the day, because daily instructions appeared on the board. The students self-started, I did not have to be present to get them started. Some students chose to come in early to have extra time at the creative writing center, use the tape recorder, see a film-strip, sit and read quietly, or share an activity with another student in the room.

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What did these activities provide? They gave my students self-discipline, self-motivation, and provided them with a variety of communication skills. The message they received was try it, use it, share with someone, and learn all you can. These were children who lived in the heart of the steel industry and were primarily Black and Latin. They came to school with a broad language base and I capitalized on it in every conceivable way. My room wasn't always the quietest, but it was the busiest educationally. No question was too 'stupid', nor any problem too small or insignificant. The students knew the room was there for them and they used it. The art activities, the creative books, and the aroma of food cooking always crept into the rest of the building. If students were not in school early or I left school early, the rest of the staff thought I had to be ill.

With college students, first and foremost they must have the various language learning theories reviewed. Oftentimes they have heard them in their Foundations courses and they tuck them away and out of sight. Now is the time to reactivate this knowledge along with general developmental theories. I do not believe any one theory should be espoused, but that the students have any opportunity to review them and look at them in the light of the areas being taught and through various experiences. Students are told that teachers must remain flexible because children are people, and just as each of them learns in a different way, so will their students. This is an aspect that makes teaching exciting and challenging. I feel that the majority of the prospective teachers coming out of my classes learn that children are special, learn differently, and that they must remain flexible and knowledgeable--always learning.

Prospective teachers should be presented each area of the Language Arts with some historical perspective. This helps them understand the "why" of a subject. Additionally they must experience the area themselves. If the area is Spelling, I give them a test modeling the test giving procedure. If the area is handwriting, they are taught how to sit, how to write manuscript or cursive on paper and on the board. If the area entails literature or poetry, students create their own poems, read a book of their choice, and do semantic webbings. If the area is creative writing I provide them with topics and they go through the steps with a partner, or by themselves.

The common strand that runs through any and all areas of the Language Arts is *communication.* Prospective teachers must realize that all areas involve some type of communication and this in and of itself makes the Language Arts interrelated. They should understand that although I may be teaching Spelling to my students, I can also be providing them with phonics analysis, study skills, creative writing, reading, and a comprehension of the materials provided.

I try to impress upon my college students that they enjoyed the interaction, the sharing of thoughts and ideas, and in some instances were frustrated by the materials, but they were learning. It is these very same things that make a classroom atmosphere exciting and help children expand their knowledge base. We all know it can't be that at all times, but we do know that is what makes the difference. As prospective teachers of the Language Arts they will have to find the middle ground to instill excitement in learning; provide students with the where-with-all to continue learning; and provide the success in communicating.